

California, U.S. Set Water Plan, Ending Battle

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California and the federal government agreed on a historic new water plan that helps wildlife, mainly at the expense of farmers.

The pact for the moment ends almost-decades of bitter wrangling between state agencies, environmentalists, farmers, urban water districts and federal regulators. It calls for farmers and cities to relinquish water equal to about 10% of the water drawn from the San Francisco Bay delta each year. Most of the surrendered water will come from agriculture.

About 20 million people get their drinking water from the delta, but agriculture historically has used about 75% of water drawn from the delta.

Agriculture's heavy pumping — even in periods of drought — has caused extensive environmental damage in the delta, destroying habitat for such now-protected species as the Sacramento River winter run chinook salmon and the delta smelt. Much of the water — for which farmers have paid little because of federal subsidies — has been used to irrigate desert acreage for cotton and rice, crops that also are subsidized because of chronic oversupply. The policy has been attacked by courts, Congress and environmentalists for decades, but farmers generally have been able to keep their stranglehold on California's water.

Yesterday's agreement was hailed by the White House. The federal government praised it as the kind of cooperative approach to balancing environmental and economic concerns that the Clinton administration has been talking about — but having some difficulty achieving — since it took office.

"This historic agreement is good for economic growth, good for the environment and good for California and the nation," President Bill Clinton said.

The pact was good political news for defenders of the Endangered Species Act, which include Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt. He and other supporters of the act are bracing for a likely Republican-led effort to gut the statute, which critics say costs too many jobs in the name of saving wildlife. The water agreement is likely to join the recovery of the bald eagle as Mr. Babbitt's chief evidence that the act is flexible enough to balance economics and conservation without major revisions.

Under the agreement, farmers and cities will surrender about 450,000 acre feet of water each year in order to meet new state and Environmental Protection Agency water quality standards and to meet federal Endangered Species Act requirements. The water will be left in the delta system to bring water levels back up and to decrease water salinity, two key factors for wildlife survival. In dry years, farmers and cities would be required to yield as much as 1.1 million acre feet of water. (An acre foot is 326,000 gallons.)

Typically, about 4.5 million acre feet of water are drawn from the delta, the vast majority for irrigation.

Environmentalists had hoped to free up more water for wildlife, but were satisfied with the pact nonetheless.

"The bottom line is this agreement will help wildlife — and soon," said Tom Graff, an attorney for the Environmental Defense Fund, which has battled water interests over the issue for years. Under the agreement, the additional water for wildlife likely will start becoming available in February.